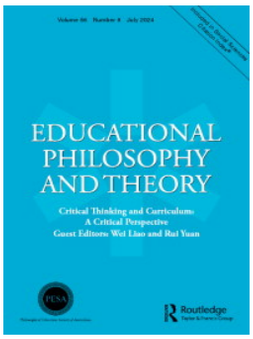

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Jonas Thiel & Edda Sant

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Democracy as intra-action: Some educational implications when we diffract John Dewey's, Karen Barad's and Ernesto Laclau's work

Jonas Thiel[a] and Edda Sant[b]

[a]Faculty of Health and Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom; [b]Manchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This article scrutinises the ontological nature of democracy and the implications that different ontological assumptions might have for educational practice. To achieve this, we use Karen Barad's notion of diffraction to read John Dewey's, Ernesto Laclau's and Barad's theoretical insights through one another. Our starting point is Dewey's famous sentence that 'democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living' (2001, p. 91). Based on this, we pose two questions. Firstly, we ask, 'How can we understand democracy as a mode of associated living?' We explore Dewey's quotation first, then fold in Laclau's conflictual understanding of democracy, followed by Barad's agential realist notion of intra-action. Secondly, we ask, 'What are the educational consequences of these ontological understandings?' Here, we make three assertions: (a) democracy and education could be understood as emerging together involving entanglements that cut across micro-macro levels of scale; (b) democratic processes always contain exclusions carrying risks for educators and (c) 'living' needs to trouble the well-worn human/non-human binary and consider wider naturalcultural phenomena.

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Introduction

This article scrutinises the ontological nature of democracy and the implications that different ontological assumptions might have for educational practice. Drawing upon the work of Karen Barad, we seek to 'walk around in' (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021, p. 32) the concept of democracy in democratic education to consider how some 'particular kinds of configurations—and not others' (p. 32) come to matter. More specifically, Barad writes

> it takes me forever to read an equation or a sentence. I walk around in a sentence, I walk around in a word. A word, or even a letter, entails stories, different stories. (p. 32)

The starting point of our specific 'walk' is John Dewey's famous sentence that 'democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living' (2001, p. 91).

CONTACT Jonas Thiel j.thiel@mmu.ac.uk

Following Barad's assertion we read this sentence *slowly*, accounting for the different stories that the concept entails—or, put more precisely, how this sentence matters (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021, p. 32). We pose two questions. Firstly, we ask, 'How can we understand democracy as a mode of associated living?' Secondly, we ask, 'What are the educational consequences of Dewey's, Laclau's and Barad's ontological understandings?'

Our conceptual analysis follows a 'diffractive methodology' (Barad, 2007, p. 73). Diffraction, in its conventional sense, describes the phenomenon of waves moving 'through one another' (p. 71), such as when ripples on water intersect and either amplify or cancel one another out, resulting in a 'diffraction pattern' (p. 75). A diffractive methodology seeks to read 'insights through one another' (p. 30) whilst those insights are partially reconfigured in the process. As the authors, we are part of this diffraction process in that our specific biographies and ethical and onto-epistemological commitments are entangled with the theoretical frameworks in question (Thiel, 2018; also see Zabrodska et al., 2011). Drawing upon our previous work (Sant, 2019, 2021; Thiel, 2022), we read John Dewey's famous assertion through Ernesto Laclau's political theory and Karen Barad's Agential Realism (AR).

The article is organised into four main sections. Firstly, we outline how Dewey's quotation is dominantly embraced in contemporary democratic education scholarship. Secondly, we discuss Ernesto Laclau's (e.g. 2005) key concepts of 'hegemony' and 'antagonism' and read these concepts through Dewey's sentence. Thirdly, we introduce Karen Barad's Agential Realism (AR) and read their philosophy through our previous analysis of Dewey's and Laclau's work. Fourthly, we address our second question and consider the educational implications of our analysis.

We wish to emphasise two analytical considerations. Firstly, in this article, we do not engage with Dewey's work in all its dimensions and nuances. Rather, our focus is on reading the mentioned sentence *slowly*. Secondly, we recognise the important theoretical differences between Dewey, Laclau, and Barad (see, e.g. Thiel, 2022). But, as Barad (2007), we understand these as 'differences-in-the-(re)making' (p. 175). Differences do not precede their encounter—rather, they always entail some co-contingency, some dependence on *relations* where a 'difference' always coincides with an 'entangling'. In short, 'difference' is about 'differentiating-entangling' using just 'one move' (Barad, 2014, p. 174). Through this diffractive process of 'differentiating-entangling', we hope to theorise different ways of understanding democracy in democratic education scholarship.

John Dewey: 'A mode of associated living'

John Dewey's 'Democracy and Education' is often regarded as one of the seminal pieces inaugurating the 'field' of democratic education (Sant, 2019). Within this book, Dewey (1916/2001, p. 91) asserted: 'Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living'.

Dewey's concept of democracy has significantly influenced deliberative approaches to democracy which currently dominate democratic education scholarship, policy, and practice (Gibson, 2020; Ruitenberg, 2015; Sant, 2019). Deliberative theorists give ontological primacy to communities over individuals and position democracy as desirable. Differences are regulated through *communication procedures* which push individuals to prioritise their commitment towards the common good over their own interests. Thus, decision-making will be fair and inclusive.

The priority of deliberative democratic education is to educate young citizens in communicative skills so they can (a) be impartial when seeking the common good, (b) participate in and resolve political disputes so their associations with others remain and political decisions can be made, and (c) ultimately reach consensual decisions for future courses of action (Sant, 2019). As Gibson (2020) explains, deliberation here functions both as a process and as an outcome. It is the *procedural* 'type of cooperative inquiry structured around a shared problem that students must navigate in order to come to a consensual decision' (p. 434) and it is the desired *outcome* or the 'hoped-for approach that students-as-citizens might default to when trying to

communicate and make decisions across difference, both in schools and in civic spaces' (p. 434). In short, students learn to deliberate by deliberating.

It is worth exploring Dewey's 'definition' of democracy as 'a mode of associated living' in the context of his own writing to deepen our understanding. In Democracy and Education, Dewey explains that 'two elements […] both point to democracy' (p. 91): (1) a plurality of views and recognition of mutual interest, and (2) the contingency of social habits. He then suggests why education is important for democracy: it is often argued that popular suffrage can only function if 'those who elect and who obey their governors are educated' (p. 91) but there is also a deeper explanation of why democracy needs education. As democracy is plural (there are different viewpoints) and contingent (it changes through time), unless citizens are educated, 'they will be overwhelmed by the changes in which they are caught and whose significance or connections they do not perceive' (p. 92). Importantly, Dewey describes the multitude of ways in which society is plural and contingent. He explains,

> A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his [sic] own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his [sic] own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men [sic] from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 2001, pp. 91–92).

We can see how and why these lines have inspired current deliberative accounts of democratic education. Dewey conceives of democracy as a situated, contingent, evolving, and ever-changing reality. Thus, deliberative practices are also expected to be situated, with views open to contestation (e.g. Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023). Additionally, in contrast to liberal and neoliberal framings of democracy, Dewey thinks that democracy is something different from a simple *aggregation* of individual preferences (Sant, 2019; Stitzlein, 2014). The meaning of democracy must be simultaneously 'open' to allow situated encounters (as expected from a pragmatist philosophy), and 'closed' to emphasise that despite plurality, democracy should have 'greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests' and 'the breaking down of those barriers' (Dewey, 1916/2001, p. 91). The rejection of democracy as a *simple aggregation of individual preferences* leads Dewey to define democracy as an association of 'individuals' who, regardless of their 'class, race, and national territory', can consider other people's interests. It is precisely this 'conjoint' understanding of plurality, recognition, and 'communicated experience' which sustains the deep ties of the sentence with deliberation and deliberative democratic education - even though Dewey rarely mentions deliberation in 'Democracy and Education' (Nishiyama, 2021). In a deliberative democratic education, democracy is simultaneously a situated and concrete practice, as well as a more 'universal' 'mode' of deliberative (i.e. 'conjoint') communication between associated individuals. This association ultimately leads to consensual decisions that, whilst provisional, allow scope for action. From this, follows a consideration of democratic education that, as we have seen, positions deliberation as a process and as an outcome.

Thinking 'mode' and 'association' with Ernesto Laclau

In this article, we seek to open different ways of thinking about democracy in democratic education. Therefore, we now utilise Barad's (2007) diffractive methodology by reading Dewey's and Laclau's theories through one another.

The work of Dewey and Laclau has been previously assembled to consider the possibilities of a populist 'mode' for education (Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017; also, e.g. Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023). In our case, we focus on how Ernesto Laclau's (2005, 2007) key concepts of 'hegemony' and 'antagonism' help to theorise the tension between (a) situated and concrete practices and

(b) a more universal democratic mode (i.e. deliberation) that we discussed when examining Dewey's writing.

Mode(s)

Beginning with hegemony, Laclau (2005, 2007) positions democracy as one of the political rules that regulate our socio-political configurations. Here, the relationship between universal aspirations and everyday politics is contingent but necessary. In a democracy, institutions always attempt to represent some democratic aspirations (e.g. human rights), or, in other words, our political values are always horizons to which our political structures and practices attempt to (imperfectly) respond to. It is precisely the impossibility of perfect representation, of mapping out our concrete and institutional realities to our universalising expectations, that democracy becomes ontologically possible. As the horizon remains unreachable, there are always possibilities for new political ventures. The constant attempt to hegemonise our political horizons (i.e. filling the empty aspiration with specific political concrete practice) allows democracy to exist. In other words, the construction of hegemony, understood as the process through which different particulars 'compete' to invest themselves as the dominant universal, makes democracy possible. There is not *one* democratic mode but *many,* all of which attempt to gain hegemony as the *only* democratic mode. For instance, the way in which deliberative accounts position deliberation as the democratic mode *par excellence* can be seen as an attempt to hegemonise the meaning of democracy.

Importantly, the possibility of democracy is the result of particular socio-historical conditions (Laclau, 2007):

> Without a universalism of sorts – the idea of human rights, for instance – a truly democratic society is impossible […] democracy needs universalism […but] universalism is one of the vocabularies, of the language games, which was constructed at some point by social agents and it has become a more and more central part of our values and our culture. It is a contingent historical product. (p. 122)

In Laclau's analysis, democracy is possible only if a universalist desire remains. But, at the same time, this desire is not universalisable. The modes of democracy are the relationships between the universal and particulars, but these modes are in themselves a socio-historical and contingent political project (see, e.g. da Costa, 2023).

Association

We now turn our attention to the concept of antagonism. For Laclau, the ways in which individuals regulate differences to build hegemonic projects are far from the 'consensual' association of individuals that one could deduce from Dewey's quote. In 'On Populist Reason', Laclau (2005) explains antagonism in the context of populism[1]. Building on Thiel (2022), we revisit Laclau's suggestion to imagine a 'group of people' (Laclau, 2005, p. 73) who have nothing in common with one another except a shared antagonism - i.e. a certain animosity - towards an outside entity. For example, a subsection of these people may have inadequate *housing* and therefore demand adequate living conditions. Another group may lack medical insurance and therefore demand this insurance. Faced with unresponsive 'local authorities' (p. 73), the whole group may now build a 'shared identity' based solely on their 'shared antagonism' towards these local authorities. Beyond this antagonism, the 'subgroups 'may lack any connection with one another. Rather, it is the shared antagonism which promotes 'equivalential links' (p. 89) - or 'equivalential chains' (p. 125) - between the subgroups. Crucially, it is the *division* - Laclau calls this the 'antagonistic frontier' (p. 83) - between the subgroups and their opposing force which makes the whole group of people emerge. The antagonistic frontier is a strange kind of boundary as

it does not divide pre-given identities into two opposing forces. Rather, the antagonistic frontier is *productive* in that it generates a shared group identity: 'the people'. Laclau (2007, p. 38) explains that an individual's or a group's identity emerges 'only so far as it is different from the others: difference = identity'.

In Laclau's account, hegemony-building—i.e. building a discourse which eventually becomes the dominant societal discourse—unavoidably requires participation in these antagonistic processes. Thus, the mere possibility of democracy always leads to some form of exclusion. As Chantal Mouffe[2] puts it, 'the logic of democracy does indeed imply a moment of closure which is required by the very process of constituting the "people"' (2000, p. 43). The 'demos' of democracy is always limited.

In summary, for Laclau, democracy is only possible as a consequence of the following two imperfect and interconnected social dynamics: (a) the hegemonic dynamic, in which concrete practices always attempt to fulfil impossible universal desires, and (b) the antagonistic dynamic which makes it difficult to constitute political allies without positioning adversaries.

Thinking 'mode', 'association' and 'living' with Karen Barad

We now engage in a third diffraction by reading Dewey's definition as well as Laclau's and Barad's theories 'through one another' (Barad, 2007, p. 71; see Thiel, 2022). We follow this path specifically in relation to the concepts of 'mode', 'association', and 'living'.

Mode(s)

Barad's (2007) 'agential realism' incorporates both quantum-physical as well as feminist and poststructural insights—and at its heart is the notion of intra-action. Intra-action is *the* universal ontological principle and, hence, intra-action does not only govern the 'social' and 'natural' world but troubles the often taken-for-granted binary between social and natural practices altogether. All matter is the result of intra-action, from the microscopic to the macroscopic, from atoms to human interactions and associations to planetary systems.

Intra-action rejects the Newtonian idea of 'interaction', i.e. that the universe contains discrete and independent *entities* which move in *time* and through *space* and then *interact* - e.g. imagine two pool balls moving on a pool table and hitting one another. Rather, Barad (2007, p. ix) argues that material entities do not 'preexist their interactions', but *emerge out of intra-action (i.e. out of their encounter)*. For example, we suggest that pool balls emerge out of their mutual intra-action and their intra-action with the pool table instead of pre-existing this relation. In short, Barad (2007, p. 140) argues that 'relata do not pre-exist relations'. Similarly, one experimental apparatus *produces* atoms as waves whereas another produces atoms as particles. That is, (a) atoms *become either* of the two through their intra-action with (b) the measuring apparatus (comprising both the device *and* the researcher), which materialises too. Barad calls the (inextricable) combination of measuring apparatus and observed object a *phenomenon*. Phenomena are split by so-called 'agential cuts' which cut 'together and apart' (p. 389) each phenomenon into 'object of observation' and 'agencies of observation', i.e. into object and observer[3]. Agential cuts are generative. That is, the agential cut *generates* (a) atoms and (b) the apparatus (device + researcher). Agential cuts also cut across scales: instead of the 'micro' being neatly 'nested' (p. 245) within the 'macro', the micro and the macro are folded through one another. In the 'enfolding' (p. 245) of the cut, we suggest that the full macro-micro dynamics (including their distinction) emerge.

What gives objects their permanence is intra-action combined with *iterativity*. Building on the notion of performativity (Butler, 1993), which describes how bodies become gendered through the incessant *repetition* of cultural practices, Barad extends this principle to all matter: instead of,

for example, the pool balls being static entities, they rather 'repeatedly become', that is, are the product of 'iterative intra-actions' (p. 237). Crucially, this 'iterative production of boundaries' (p. 93) suggests that fixity is an illusion, just as a torch moved repeatedly in a circle only gives the mere appearance of a circle (our example, also see Thiel, 2022). Boundaries are iterative agential cuts.

The notion of intra-action has important implications for the way we conceptualise the mode of democracy. Similar to Laclau (2005), for whom 'elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it' (p. 68), for Barad (2007) 'relata do not pre-exist relations' (p. 40). There is no such thing as a democratic mode (e.g. deliberation) that precedes the democratic encounter; rather *relations* play a constitutive role. It is when a 'particular' seeks to hegemonise the 'universal' that the 'mode' of democracy emerges. However, the 'universal' must not be understood as an abstract generality, but rather as a specific meaningful, intra-active becoming which may matter differently for different groups of people. In short, 'everything is specific' (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021, p. 28): it is the specific intra-action between particulars and the universal that makes both particular practices and universal aspirations emerge in the first place. Democratic modes are iterative agential cuts—and may sometimes include educators and pupils who participate in democratic repeated becomings.

Associations

For Barad, all intra-actions both produce matter (and meaning), but also, akin to Laclau, simultaneously *exclude* other things (and meanings) from materialising (Barad, 2007). In short, exclusions are constitutive of reality. For example, atoms cannot become a wave and a particle at the same time: both phenomena are mutually exclusive. In addition, Laclau (2005, p. ix) suggests that 'social demands' are 'both inside and outside' the established order they make demands of. We now propose that *social demands are intra-actions* which produce 'exteriority within' phenomena (Barad, 2007, p. 184). That is, within an antagonistic phenomenon two entities emerge out of their entanglement and are separated by an agential cut, in this case, an 'antagonistic frontier'. This antagonistic frontier then fully determines the identity of 'the people', e.g. without an 'oppressor', there would be no 'oppressed'. *We suggest that all antagonistic frontiers are 'agential cuts', but that not all agential cuts are antagonistic.* Antagonisms do not 'preexist their interactions' (p.ix) but rather emerge by enacting repeated agential cuts within intra-action. Laclau's (2005, p. 83) 'antagonistic frontiers' are 'iterative processes' (Barad, 2007, p. 207) which do not only describe but *create* 'reality'.

However, by entangling, i.e. 'cutting together-apart' (Barad, 2014:title), Laclau's and Barad's writing, we assert that there are 'differences that matter' (Barad, 2007, p. 72), for example in how both authors conceptualise 'association', including oppositions. Laclau (2014) follows Kant to distinguish three types of oppositions: logical 'contradictions', 'antagonisms' and 'real oppositions'. Contradictions happen at a purely conceptual level, e.g. when one statement contradicts another statement (e.g. A-not A). Antagonisms, as discussed above, are restricted to the '*social world*'. 'Real opposition' describes when fully-formed objects interact, such as two vehicles crashing, i.e. 'a material fact obeying positive physical laws' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014; p. 126). Laclau's notion of 'real opposition' is, however, anchored in Newtonian physics, i.e. a view of the universe in which matter, space and time are separate categories whilst 'objects' are understood as *positive* entities that interact. Conversely, Barad's (2007) agenda is to think of 'nature' and 'culture' together as 'naturalcultural' phenomena (p. 32). More specifically, Barad's ontology rejects Newtonian physics by arguing that instead of independent objects interacting, they emerge through intra-action and do not exist 'before' their encounter. Hence, the concepts 'real opposition' and 'intra-action' are mutually exclusive. In fact, Laclau's antagonism is further away from 'real opposition' than from Barad's intra-action (*cf.* Thiel, 2022). Instead, Laclau's three examples of oppositions (real oppositions, logical contradictions, and antagonisms) all become instantiations of intra-action.

Living

This brings us to the third, until now unexplored, word in Dewey's sentence: *living*.

To reiterate, Barad (2007) understands all processes as being 'naturalcultural' (p. 232) and 'material-discursive' (p. 140). That is, akin to Laclau, Barad's (2007) work is tied to a relational ontology, however, with a caveat: intra-action applies to all observable matter in our universe, including 'humans' and thus 'human democratic practices'. In Barad's account, not only democratic or social phenomena, but *all* observable phenomena are relational because they are always the product of intra-action. Barad and Gandorfer (2021, p. 19) write:

> Rather than assuming the cut (human/non-human) and accepting it as a given, posthumanism as I mean it, is considering the cut itself as a constitutive part of what the theorising or analysis entails.

Hence, using a 'human' vs 'non-human' binary is already in itself an agential cut which, importantly, has been 'sedimented' (p. 19) into commonly accepted knowledge and practices. Thus, we question that only 'human' individuals participate in associated living and we assert that this 'human-centred' framing, itself, is the result of a hegemonisation, that is, an 'iterative production of boundaries' (Barad, 2007, p. 93). We argue that 'associations' are part of a complex technological-ecological environment, as Dewey himself pointed out in different sections of his writing (e.g. 1916/2001, p. 5). One only needs to think of the ways algorithms, viruses, or climate disasters 'participate' in our intra-actions to recognise the complexity and connectedness of associations. These associations transcend the non/human binary - at all levels of scale.

Importantly, not only matter but also space and time are co-produced through intra-action (Barad, 2007). In fact, there is no such thing as space, time and matter, rather there is only 'spacetimemattering' (p. 175): matter, space and time emerge out of intra-action. Events that happened a long time ago—admittedly a rather Newtonian framing because temporality becomes nonlinear in Barad's account—may be more acutely entangled with the 'pulse of here and now' (p. 394) than those 'events' which *appear* spatially or temporally closer-by. In this respect, Barad's ontology forces us to push the boundaries of the 'living' to those who are no longer alive, or those who have not yet been born. We can ask, for instance, how do we consider associations that break down spacetimematter barriers? How do past, present, and future matters entangle-differentiate to build equivalential chains by, for example, connecting to 'past' stories or 'future' possibilities?

How do our diffractive readings relate to democratic practices and democratic education?

After our diffraction of Dewey's, Barad's and Laclau's ontologies, we are now able to rethink 'democratic education'. Importantly here, the theories and sentences we use to make sense of phenomena are not separate from these phenomena. Rather, when we use a theory, the phenomenon in question also changes. Put differently, theories are not separate from our enquiry, but rather 'theorizing is a matter of already engaging as part *of* the world (not even *with* the world)' (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021, p. 16; emphasis in original).

The democratic mode(s): Democracy and education emerge together

Thinking together with Barad and Laclau, we suggest that the meaning attributed to democracy fully emerges from the specific situation itself. There is not a single democratic mode, but many. This conceptualisation takes Dewey's contingent account of democracy, and its relationship with education, beyond the boundaries of dominant deliberative accounts. Education is not prescribed by the process and outcome of deliberation (Gibson, 2020). Rather,

democracy and education *emerge* together, thereby opening up new possibilities for how democracy may matter henceforth. As Szkudlarek (2011) puts it, in schools, 'democracy' circulates as an important category, but one that, at the same time, is 'impossible to define or understand' (p. 122).

The democratic mode(s) can emerge only insofar as there is a relationship between particular demands and 'universal' claims. Again, we understand 'universal claims' as specific matterings in their own right where the meanings of 'universals' and 'particular demands' emerge concurrently. Without particular demands, universal claims would not come to matter. Democracy is only possible because of the material-discursive practices of universalism and hegemony; hence, democratic education needs to somehow define the meaning of democracy beyond the boundaries of the specific educational encounter. For example, it is not enough to argue that a particular exam grade is unfair—it needs to be argued in relation to a wider democratic demand (e.g. the grade is unfair because the lecturer considered only the Western canon to assess the value of the cited references). Put differently, democratic educational encounters always operate as micro-macro-operations. Hence, the educational micro encounter needs to connect to the political 'macro' discourses. The micro, however, must not be understood as being neatly 'nested' (Barad, 2007, p. 245) within the macro; rather micro phenomena (e.g. 'it's unfair') must be visibly 'enfolded through' macro phenomena (e.g. 'because of colonial sedimented academic practices').

For collective democratic identities to stabilise, democratic encounters must become iterative. We, therefore, suggest that schools must enable a multitude of democratic encounters in classrooms throughout the years, i.e. democratic principles and opportunities must be made to matter throughout the curriculum.

The exclusions of associations

In contrast with dominant deliberative readings, we understand that democratic modes produce constitutive exclusions. As Laclau suggests, democratic politics always leads to the creation of an 'us versus them' principle. The associated demos cannot be all-encompassing. It is precisely the original exclusion that produces democratic encounters, builds democratic and collective subjectivities, and enables the possibility of participating in the hegemonic construction of what constitutes democracy. Of course, this original democratic exclusion is highly controversial. For example, Mårdh and Tryggvason (2017) critique that antagonisms can produce collective identities *opposed* to liberal democracy in that '[a]n educational articulation that frames the European people as standing against refugees and politicians supporting immigration would be highly questionable' (p. 611). Indeed, in contrast with other radical frameworks such as that of Mouffe (e.g. 2000), who excludes antagonisms which operate against the core values of liberty and equality, Laclau (e.g. 2007) does not tie democracy to any specific value other than its possibility of openness and non-closure. Thus, if we follow his line of thought, it is not possible to define the parameters through which exclusions are to be 'tolerated'. This is an important risk to be considered by democratic educators, regardless of which democratic mode they align with.

We want to emphasise, however, that uncritical 'iterations' of democracy may also carry their own risks (see e.g. da Costa, 2023). Even though we, as authors, hold deep ethical commitments to democracy, we also acknowledge that as with other 'concepts in the traditional Western philosophical conception', there is a risk of violence if we make 'the concept into an idea rather than turning to the material historicity that a concept is' (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021, p. 32). Through democracy, educators might wish to perpetuate valuable ethical commitments, but the challenge is to do it in such a way that these commitments are not betrayed in themselves. Put bluntly, we cannot force others to be democratic because it undermines democracy to do so. In our diffractive reading, democracy is contingent not only in meaning and form, but also in its existence—it is an agential cut - and as such it needs to be understood.

Associated living: Connections beyond the human/non-human binary

Is it only antagonisms, or do other naturalcultural intra-actions participate in democratic modes? This question influences how we approach democratic education in the classroom. For example, could the existential threat of climate change function as a unifying process to create alternative naturalcultural connectivity on planet Earth? Building on Mouffe (2022) and Thiel (2022), we could argue that this connectivity was, for example, embodied in recent global protest movements (cf. Holmberg & Alvinius, 2019)[4]. These movements constituted themselves based on a shared 'antagonism' (Laclau, 2005, p. 85) towards an 'antagonistic force' (i.e. future ecological collapse and its human and technological drivers). It is precisely this 'antagonistic force' that 'glued' the protest movement together by creating 'equivalential links' (p. 89) between its members' demands (e.g. reduce greenhouse gas emissions, plant trees, avoid a mass extinction of species). Importantly, the climate protests were clearly educational themselves: Verlie and Flynn (2022, p. 1), for example, highlight how students learned 'through their participation in striking, in contrast to the often insufficient climate change education taught in schools' and, what is more, that they were themselves 'becoming climate change educators through their roles as strikers'.

Of course, following Laclau's logic, international environmentalism is contingent in that it is open to competing hegemonic projects, such as recent attempts to construct eco-nationalisms (*cf.* Aronczyk, 2024). Nonetheless, the work mapping naturalcultural/material-discursive controversies in classroom settings as inspired by the affine project of Bruno Latour could be helpful here (Solli et al., 2018).

If we follow this line of thought, we may need to expand how democratic education research and practice are understood. Dominant approaches to democratic education tend to emphasise 'conjoint communicative experience'. Yet, if we are to consider 'associated living' in its naturalcultural/material-discursive dynamics, other emerging associations become equally important as teachers and students participate in democratic encounters in the classroom. For instance, are traditional classroom layouts (e.g. with the teachers' tables at the front looking at the students) an iterative production of non-democratic boundaries? Or, more broadly, in what ways might the naturalcultural associations in the classroom facilitate democratic modes of associated living? In this respect, democratic education research could be enhanced by considering recent developments in bio-social educational research (e.g. Trafi-Prats & de Freitas, 2024).

Our diffractive reading might trouble existential(ised) boundaries, helping us to re-conceptualise the demos of democratic education. Democratic education scholars and practitioners can ask, for instance, how do we consider associations that break down spacetimematter barriers? In what ways do past/future/contemporary others matter in democratic education? How do 'past', 'present', and 'future' agential cuts merge in the (re-)configurations of 'equivalential chains', in Laclau's sense? In some contexts, the curricular connection between history, geography and democracy, usually under the umbrella of 'social studies' or 'social sciences' subjects, can more easily facilitate these enactments. In other countries, democracy emerges as a stand-alone request (Sant, Weinberg & Thiel, 2024) whilst history and geography are taught separately. There is an onto-axiological need to re-attach the concept of democracy to school subjects, 'turning to the material historicity that a concept is' (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021, p. 32).

Concluding remarks

This paper diffractively read John Dewey's seminal definition of democracy through Ernesto Laclau's and Karen Barad's ontologies. We specifically examined how the concepts of hegemony, antagonism, and intra-action help us to understand democratic modes, associations, and 'livings'. We have explained that,

1. democratic *modes* are contingent in form, meaning, and nature. They are iterative productions of particular-universal/micro-macro dynamics. These dynamics also apply to

educational encounters. Through participation in (a) the production of collectives and (b) stabilising connections between micro and macro educational and political events, democratic educators 'iteratively' participate in, and emerge through, the hegemonic production and 'mattering' of certain democratic meanings and subjectivities to the exclusion of others.

2. democratic *associations* cannot be all-encompassing. The production of democracy depends on the exclusion of what is considered to be/not to be democratic, and who/what is seen to conform to the demos. Democratic educators need to be in constant alert of the agential cuts they participate in. We need to ask ourselves, what is excluded when we align ourselves to a particular mode of democratic education? What is excluded when we turn the concept of democracy into an untouchable idea, without accounting for its historicity?
3. democratic *living* can be 'enhanced' to account for associations which cut across the nature/culture dichotomy to fully include naturalcultural processes and other space-time matters. Here, democratic educators could expand and 'reborder' democratic education by considering naturalcultural threats or past/future others to trouble essentialised antagonisms emerging in educational encounters. They could also investigate associations beyond human and current time-space domains.

There are, of course, limitations to our discussion. Given our intention to read Dewey's definition slowly and carefully and our word limit, we have paid little attention to the rest of his work. Indeed, in 'Democracy and Education', a whole section discusses the distinction between living and inanimate things, which might be worth considering in future academic endeavours. Future research could also explore more fully how Barad's (2007) agential realism conceptually exceeds Laclau's antagonism and what this means for democratic education. As agential realism has the potential to theorise all matter(s) in the universe, it can theorise antagonistic as well as other understandings of democracy.

In conclusion, this article's take on democratic education does not necessarily trouble Dewey's understanding of democracy as a 'mode of associated living'; rather, it opens new ways how we could understand those 'modes' of 'association' including its 'living members'. In particular, we have made a case for strategically expanding and 'rebordering' democratic education by considering naturalcultural and spacetimematter associations in educational encounters. We suspect that, despite our attempts, other aspects might have been excluded. Making democratic education matter is, anyway, always a constant, ongoing and iterative process of reimagining, expanding and rebordering democracy, in which we all participate.

Notes

1. Laclau's (2005) understanding of populism differs from conventional connotations of this concept in that he does not restrict populism to an attribute of the far-right (or fundamentalist religious groups), but rather sees populism as the political logic 'par excellence' (Laclau, 2005, p. 154).
2. Please note that, despite their shared work in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014), we decided to purposefully exclude Chantal Mouffe's (2000) discussion of 'agonism' from this debate as it would go beyond the scope of this paper and it is not a discussion Laclau engages with.
3. Barad alternatively uses the words 'subject' and 'object' or 'effect' and 'cause'.
4. See this special issue on the topic.

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Notes on contributors

Jonas Thiel is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Health and Education at Manchester Metropolitan University. Mainly teaching on undergraduate and postgraduate primary teacher education programmes, Jonas's research interests span higher education research, neoliberalism, new materialist and Foucauldian philosophy, populism and arts education. Jonas has published in international research journals, such as BERJ and Discourse. He has recently published a book for Routledge which critically investigates the global proliferation of rating and ranking practices.

Edda Sant is a senior lecturer at The University of Manchester. Her research focuses primarily on issues related to political, citizenship and democratic education. She has published more than 40 books, chapters, and journal articles on this topic. Among them, one of her co-authored articles was awarded the Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association Best Publication Award (2015), her 2019 review on 'democratic education' was published in Review of Educational Research and her more recent monograph, 'Political Education in Times of Populism' was published in 2021 by Palgrave Macmillan.

ORCID

Jonas Thiel http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3224-3544
Edda Sant http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7907-5907

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